

Innovation Schools: Areas of Autonomy and Flexibility

The following are the areas of autonomy and flexibility included in the Innovation School model, and examples of strategies that applicants establishing Innovation Schools can consider when designing their initial prospectuses and innovation plans.

1. **Curriculum and Assessment**: The freedom to structure curriculum and assessment practices to best meet students' learning needs. While acknowledging that Innovation schools are expected to administer any state- and district-required assessments, these schools have the flexibility to best determine which school-based curricula and assessment practices will prepare students for state and district assessments. This could include:
 - Freedom from local district curriculum requirements;
 - Graduation requirements set by the school, not by the district, with an emphasis on using competency-based, performance-based assessments; and
 - Freedom from required district professional development offerings.
2. **Staffing**: The freedom to manage staff members as needed in order to create a unified school community, subject to approval by two-thirds of the existing teachers in a conversion school or negotiation of waivers/modifications to the collective bargaining agreement in a new school. This could include:
 - Establishing staffing patterns and creating job descriptions which best meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of students; and
 - Hiring staff that best fit the needs of the school, regardless of their current status (member of the district or not, although every teacher hired becomes a member of the local teachers union).
3. **Budget**: A lump sum per pupil budget in which the school has complete discretion to spend funding in the manner that provides the best programs and services to students and their families. This could include:
 - A lump sum per pupil budget, the sum of which is equal to other schools within the grade span; and
 - District itemization of all central office costs, and freedom on the part of Innovation schools to choose to purchase identified discretionary district services or to not purchase them and include them in the school's lump sum per pupil budget.

4. **District Policies:** The freedom to create a school's programs and policies, while being mindful of state and federal requirements. This could include:
 - Increased governing responsibilities for the school's site council, including the following: principal selection and supervision, with final approval by the superintendent in all cases; budget approval; and setting of work conditions for faculty; and
 - Freedom from all district policies and the authority to set policies that the school community feels will best promote student success (including, among others, promotion, graduation, attendance, and discipline policies).
5. **School Calendar:** The freedom to set longer school days and calendar years for both students and faculty. For example, research supports a correlation between faculty planning time spent on teaching and learning and increased student achievement. Scheduling which allows for summer and school year faculty planning time could contribute to a more unified school community. This could include:
 - Increasing planning and professional development time for faculty;
 - Increasing learning time for students; and
 - Organizing the school schedule in ways that maximize learning time for students and planning time for faculty (e.g., longer days Monday through Thursday in order to have half-days for students on Fridays, enabling faculty a professional development block every Friday afternoon).
6. **Professional Development:** The freedom to structure the professional development activities according to the needs of the students, staff, and faculty of the school. This could include:
 - Modifying or transforming the structure and/or content of professional development activities to meet the specific needs of the school's student population, regardless of the district's professional development activities; and
 - Restructuring the daily schedule in order to fully integrate professional development into the daily collaboration of teachers within the school.

The innovation plan must articulate the desired autonomy and flexibility in 1 or more of these areas. However, if an applicant chooses to include multiple areas of autonomy and flexibility in the initial prospectus and innovation plan, we encourage the applicant to connect proposed strategies in different areas to maximize the benefit to the school. For example, the implementation of innovative strategies with regard to curriculum should be connected to a robust staffing plan, and the implementation of innovative strategies with regard to staffing should be connected to a strategic budget plan.

Note: if an innovation plan includes proposed provisions that conflict with state laws governing other public schools or Innovation Schools regulations, the applicant(s) must request approval by the Commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education and the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education respectively. Detailed information about securing approval is available at the following website: <http://www.doe.mass.edu/news/news.aspx?id=5652>.